



performing cultures

edited by Jakub Petri



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Art, Literature, and New Technologies

Since its emergence in the late 1960s, digital communication has revolutionised the way we understand art. As has happened often in history, technological innovations developed in the context of war or power struggles have led to transformations in domestic life, manifested in cultural production. But the evolution from military technology to art galleries was not clear from the beginning. In 1974, Irmeline Lebeer asked the pioneer of visual art, Nam June Paik, if he thought that video art would grow extensively, as there were serious reservations regarding the validity of the form at that time. Paik was unequivocal about his support for the form, believing that it was the only way to do something new, something that would transcend the overwhelming influence of Duchamp in 20th century art¹.

However, Paik did not explain why he thought digital art meant such an innovation. Most likely, it seemed the obvious strategy at the moment, given that video could be deployed as a means of artistic expression that was radically different from any of the materials available until then. But were there real and substantial differences between the industrially produced objects Duchamp used for his “ready mades” and Paik’s video tapes?

On the one hand, Duchamp expanded in a previously unimaginable way the number and type of materials that could be used for art. With his *objects trouvés*, he initiated a radical move towards the evolution from materiality to abstraction and conceptual art. On the other, and for the same reason (just *any* material could be used to make art), Duchamp also spearheaded the alternative current of contemporary art in the 20th century that privileged the material aspect of art.

The digital world, however, introduced a genuine novelty. Here, materiality is reduced to a crystal surface that does not present reality or even its appearance, but merely its simulation or fictional nature. Digital art is a new step in the conception of art, where even matter, as Méredieu explains, “is transformed

into something purely abstract, conceptual”². We can conclude that Paik’s intuition was right and that his experiments opened the door to a whole current of imaginative and singular art.

The first key step in the use of video installations happened in the context of the Fluxus movement. After Wolf Vostell, who pioneered the inclusion of an operating TV in a work of art (*The German Look*, 1958), Naim June Paik was the first to record a video tape and show it in public as art (*Electronic Video Recorder*, 1965)³. A year before this second event, Marshall McLuhan had published *Understanding Media*, a book that significantly influenced counterculture and art in the 1960s and 1970s. Video artists, in particular, used his theories to reimagine their own possibilities. The Canadian philosopher of communication theory argued that we tend to think that technology is only a medium that serves to convey information, but in fact, “the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs”⁴. In this context, his opinion of how his contemporaries managed new media impact is rather negative: “The electric technology is within the gates, and we are numb, deaf, blind, and mute about its encounter with the Gutenberg technology, on and through which the American way of life was formed”. Further, he continues, “our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot”⁵.

Artists and activists generally responded to McLuhan’s reflections confrontationally, demonstrating their opposition to his ideas about medium by angrily criticizing him and even publicly destroying television sets. That was Wolf Vostell’s attitude. In the Yam Festival (1963), he wrapped a TV in barbed wire and buried it “alive” while it continued broadcasting. That same year he led the public of the Parnass Gallery (Wuppertal, Germany) to a quarry where a TV in use could be seen in the distance; then he took a gun and shot at it. His actions became a form of criticism, a commitment to the field of social consciousness. Similarly, Paik’s early performances with new media included the destruction of TV sets, but he soon ceased these violent actions. He remained critical, however, treating TV with irony and provocation, and censuring viewers’ passive roles. In the long term, he focused increasingly on the artistic possibilities of TV and video’s recorded light⁶.

In fact, “Paik’s work in some sense celebrates the physical fact of the TV set (...), considered as a mechanism and an article of furniture highly charged with a set of social meanings”⁷. In his first solo exhibition, *Exposition of Music-Electronic Television* (Galerie Parnass, 1963), Paik exhibited his initial artistic explorations of the mass media with televisions that used magnets to distort their reception of broadcast transmissions. He continued to work on those “TV sculptures” through time, with works such as *Candle TV* (1975), where he

replaced the cathode ray tube with a candle on a TV empty shell, or *Untitled (piano)* (1993), a complex installation with a piano and fifteen televisions. The piece emits sentimental piano music, while the screens show footage of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, intermixed with other images. Contemporary authors like Gary Hill have continued working with TV sets in a sculpture-oriented way, as seen in the tasteful arrangement of artworks like *Inasmuch as It Is Always Already Taking Place* (1990) or *Crux* (1983–1987).

This kind of original video art should be distinguished, as Danto does, from video installations that emphasize the image itself, “which makes no reference to the physical circumstances of its projection, and which, in some of the most powerful examples of the art form I know, seeks entirely to transcend the material conditions of television”⁸. Video installation is understood today as an art form that foregrounds video as its central component, but one wherein the images relate to other objects and materials, occupying a specific space. Clearly, video installations exceed the limited framework of a TV set and are not conditioned by nor have any relation to television as a medium of communication. New technologies have also enabled projection systems that remove the image from the monitor, eliminating the previous relationship between the image and a screen. The spectator is welcomed to a space that integrates images and other items in it. Bill Viola’s work exemplifies the ways video art can convey transcendental themes of human consciousness and experience: birth and death, love and hate, etc. His artwork has a high lyrical quality that impacts spectators deeply. Although his installations have a profoundly personal and contemporary aesthetic, Viola also produces more traditional painting, in works like *The Greeting* (1995), an reimagining of Pontorno’s *The Visitation*, or *The Passions* (2003), which reflects the spirit of renaissance Christian art.

Another stage in the evolving relationship between art and new technologies involved the birth of the world of computers, beginning in the late 1960s. The first important computer art exhibition, *Cybernetic Serendipity*, took place in 1968 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) of London. Nam June Paik was there, along with other artists such as A. Michael Noll, John Whitney, and Frieder Nak, among others. But the real expansion of digital art came with the manufacturing of the first desktop computers in the 1980s. If Fluxus had expanded the old concept of sculpture to a whole rank of new dimensions, from new media to action or performance, computers were first associated to painting. Using the expression, “digital painting”, new experiments including computer generated art or digital animation, digital manipulation of photographs or camera captions, developed. Possibly the best known example is Andy Warhol’s “painting” of Debbie Harry, created using one of the first Commodore Amiga computers⁹.

The novelty that computers gave to art can be understood from digital expert Herbert W. Franke's declarations in 1985:

At the beginning of its development it was to be expected that the artistic forms of computer graphics would be integrated into the fine arts, but the latest situation leads one to conclude that computer art will develop into a new field of aesthetically-oriented activity which can neither be classified as part of the existing classical branches of art, nor must it be recognized as art at all. Thus a new profession could emerge as was the case with photography and cinematography¹⁰.

In fact, today, even if digital art as photography and cinematography has an entity of its own, its place in schools of fine arts is unquestionable. Its visual and sound qualities have granted video art a place within traditional arts. I would now like to briefly discuss the relationship of new technologies with another field of art that continues to resist its possibilities and value: literature.

Conceptual art was at its highest point precisely in the 1960s, when the technical revolution began. There was a strong connection between the plastic arts, music, and literary experiments. The influence of new technologies on poets derived primarily from the abstract musical performances of John Cage¹¹. In John Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), improvisatory techniques are used to blend fragments of earlier texts into fractured compositions. Cage's engagement with technology was paralleled by Ashbery's negotiation with reproducibility and fragmentation: "There are poems (...) which express an attitude toward mass culture, and there are poems which are transformed by mass culture because they have structurally absorbed if not wholly integrated a wide range of demotic elements into the medium itself (...). *The Tennis Court Oath* belongs to the latter category"¹². That form of influence of mass media in poetry was a first step in a complex relationship between literature and technology.

But the more significant foray of technology into the world of literature came with the development of personal computers and software that made the construction of hypertexts possible. Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a story* (1987), published and distributed in diskettes, is considered the first work of electronic literature¹³. The novel tells the story of Peter, a recently divorced man who has seen a car accident and thinks that his son may have been injured or killed in it. The story is presented in text fragments of variable length that the reader navigates through hyperlinks. Every one of the words in the text is a link; the reader does not know which page he will visit as he clicks on each word. Thus, the reading of the text is not a linear process (challenging one of the traditional

characteristics of literature), and the reader never knows if he has reached the end of the story or, indeed, if he has even read all the pages of the narrative¹⁴.

Electronic works gradually became more sophisticated. *Agrippa (a book of the dead)*, (1992), was produced as a box meant to resemble a book containing a diskette. William Gibson wrote the poem on the diskette and Dennis Ashbaugh designed the book. The project's originality lay in the idea that, as the text dealt with the ethereal nature of memories, Gibson's poem was programmed to encrypt itself after a single read and, similarly, the "pages" of the book were treated with chemicals that made the words and images fade when exposed to light. There were, then, special sensorial qualities in the poem's context that made it different from a traditional text in digital format.

Literature displayed on a screen tended, by its own nature, to become pictorial. Computers opened the doors to experiments that harnessed readers' senses, by developing quality visual and phonic kinetic aesthetics. This form of intermedia literature¹⁵ functioned based on a key principle: that images or sounds were an essential part of the work, not merely forms of illustration supplements. Also, as Laura Borrás notes, an essential aspect of cyberliterature was "the concept of movement, which, undoubtedly, is one of the most defining characteristics of digital literature and probably the one that has stigmatised it the most when analysed from a horizon of expectations where the book object, stillness, stability, fixation and absence of movement (except for the movement of the eyes to capture the letters) were unavoidable references"¹⁶.

Although there have been many other experiments done with novels, the most significant achievements in this field have been in poetry. For this reason, I will focus on two projects that serve as outstanding examples of the use of computers in literature.

Poemas no meio do caminho (Poems in the Middle of the Road) created by Rui Torres (2009)¹⁷ in Portuguese, offers the reader different reading possibilities, depending on his/her navigational decisions. Rui Torres describes it in its webpage as "a set of combinatory texts programmed in a way that allows the reader to dynamically change the paradigms that feed the original syntax of the poems. The sound is also randomly generated, live-mixing voices and sound textures from a given database. Besides altering the poems, the reader can also save his/her versions on a webpage on the Internet."

The poem presents two interfaces – a vertical and horizontal one; I will centre on the horizontal one¹⁸. The poem's elegant vision is achieved by creating a textual landscape with infinite vanishing points in all directions. The reader, located in a 3D space, navigates the space and shifts his position by running the cursor over the text. Four different video-sequences contain two poems each.

The reader accesses the next poem by clicking on what appears as holes or empty spaces (containing videos) found in the text. The background voice and sounds soothingly set a poetic tone while reinforcing a sense of space.

This is a work of great elegance, with slow visual movements that create an optimal setting for poetic contemplation and reflection on the various meanings taken on by the verses when a word is changed, even when it is a term the computer provides at random. Here, the logic of the surrealist *cadavre exquis* creates a profoundly moving and effective experience. Multimediality and the possibility of moving from one verse or poem to another create different spaces, each with its own tone.

This form challenges the duality of images and texts as temporal and spatial objects, incorporating multiple levels of complexity. As Matteo d'Ambrosio remarks, "poetry is no longer the art of words. It is, in fact, what Roman Jakobson, who was very familiar with futurist experiments, showed when he foresaw that poetry would settle among the arts of space. From today's viewpoint, it is not difficult to assert that the art of time, and then the art of space, will soon become an art of movement, of dynamism, of immaterial fluidity"¹⁹. We read these poems in motion, as successive layers or hyper related in labyrinths. The already complex concept of the literary image thus acquires new nuances.

Poemas no meio do caminho also contains a loop of auto-referentiality that connects to Baudrillard's reflections on hyper reality: "Images are no longer the mirror of reality, they have invested the heart of reality and transformed it into hyper reality where, from screen to screen, the only aim of the image is the image. The image can no longer imagine the real because it is the real: it can no longer transcend reality, transfigure it or dream it, since images are virtual reality. In virtual reality, it is as if things had swallowed their mirror"²⁰. In fact, this poem combines images and text but, as Baudrillard suggests, they point to other images and texts, rather than to other forms of external reality.

In this sense there is a paradox in the title because, by quoting Dante, *Poems in the Middle of the Road* is a metaphor of the reading practice, poems midway through the reading journey. The work suggests an ephemeral poetic construction that appears and vanishes with one click: "On the one hand these poems destroy the sacredness of the poetic language; on the other they realize the *poïesis*. *Poemas* foreground the dual meaning of the art of practice and the practice of art"²¹. Dante opens the Divine Comedy with the verses: "In the midway of this, our mortal life / I found me in a gloomy wood, astray," to explain the use of a work of art as a milestone at the midpoint (indeed the climax) of lifetime, to explore the relationship between art and life. Torres, however, uses them in a postmodern way: here the process of creation is not understood as a medium

for understanding and appropriating reality but it is examined as a process in itself, as a medium of reflection that makes the reader aware of the structural system of creation.

My second example is composed of two related works: *Text rain*, by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv (1999)²², and *Still standing* by Bruno Nadeau and Jason Lewis (2005)²³.

Text Rain is an interactive installation. Spectators do not just sit in front of a screen to perceive and enjoy images and sounds, but they are meant to physically enter the piece and interact with it. As they enter the installation room, participants see a surface (a large projection screen) where letters are falling slowly, as in a rainfall of text. If they face the screen, they see themselves mirrored in it in black and white, and they soon realize that their movements alter the way the letters fall: “they appear to land on participants’ heads and arms. The letters respond to the participants’ motions and can be caught, lifted, and then let fall again”²⁴. The experience becomes dreamlike. As the creators explain in their website, “participants use the familiar instrument of their bodies to do what seems magical – to lift and play with falling letters that do not really exist”.

Here, the power of the installation lies in the interaction between the human body and the text. The slow descent of letters asks that viewers make gentle and harmonious movements. Words and verses emerge through the rhythm of bodily movement, establishing a new level and form of communication. Letters that seem to simply outline concepts become material objects, sharing the body’s physicality, while the body, projected on the screen, becomes immaterial. Therefore, the concept of the installation forces us to revise whether reading should be considered merely an intellectual act or whether it might more fruitfully be understood as a physical action involving the whole person.

This experience is reinforced in the installation by the poem that is in fact displayed in the screen. Because “the falling letters are not random, but form lines of a poem about bodies and language. ‘Reading’ the phrases in the *Text Rain* installation becomes a physical as well as a cerebral endeavour” (the poem reproduced is Evan Zimroth’s “Talk, you”²⁵).

Utterback has explained on different occasions that her main interest is not literature, but the recognition of the role that the physicality of our bodies plays in human relationships. She wants to rethink the embodied self in an increasingly mediated culture, and the nature of human interaction when exposed to new media²⁶. Thus, most often, she focuses not only on the body, but also on the symbolic systems our bodies engage with. In this installation, this symbolic system is language.

Still standing is another installation developed with techniques similar to those used in *Text Rain*. It also invites viewers to use their bodies as a reading instrument. The difference lies in that *Text Rain* requires stasis, rather than movement. Passing in front of a large screen, the participant sees a group of letters drifting slowly along the bottom part of the projected image. When he stops, facing the image, the letters begin to assemble and rise, forming the shape of the spectator's silhouette. At that point, they become legible and the participant can read the verses of *Seeking Sedation*, "a poem composed explicitly for use in the installation. It plays with the semantic and etymologic intersection between motion and commotion to advance a theme of longing for a perfect motionless moment"²⁷. This moment is attained only if the participants control the constant movement that society imposes over our lives, even over our moments of relaxation and enjoyment. In this sense, it also helps us reflect on the rate at which we have grown accustomed to receiving information in recent years, at a speed that does not allow for the necessary pause and quiet to read a work with significant symbolic weight. For this reason, Roberto Simanowski argues that, in these cases, technology does not marginalise the text, but rather seeks to focus our attention on it, counteracting the force of the action underscored by contemporary art²⁸.

At the same time, the presentation of the artwork in the ELO webpage states that "the structure of the work, along with its poetic content, might seem to suggest that reading requires cognitive rather than bodily engagement, that stillness is a necessary prerequisite. But the activity of standing still requires rigorous muscular control, such that *Still Standing* serves to remind us that reading is a fundamentally embodied activity"²⁹. Interest is decentralised: from the text to the reader, and from the reader's cognitive subjectivity to his objective physicality.

Both installations, therefore, make us aware of the fluidity of the boundaries between artistic fields. These works, although they can be considered literary, are highly participatory, requiring audience intervention: they ask for action, rather than contemplation. In many cases, the installations propose total immersion into the work, which shifts the traditional external, frontal perspective, towards the centre of the work of art.

Research on digital literature shows how the very process of computer creations breaks the horizon of expectations of traditional print literature. Thus, it helps to reconsider questions that were taken for granted until the onset of these media. As TV and computers alter and broaden the limits of fine arts, cyberliterature challenges the limits between the conceptual and the material, appearance and simulation. While most contemporary art tends to leave matter aside (its thickness and its weight) to embrace the ephemeral texture of the

digital, technical experiments have endowed recent poetry with a materiality and physicality it had never had before.

Endnotes

1. Irmeline Lebeer, "Marcel Duchamp n'a pas pensée à la vidéo", *L'art? C'est une meilleure idée! Entretiens 1972-1984*, Marseille: Jacqueline Chambon, 1997, pp. 226-239, 239.
2. Florence de Mèredieu, *Histoire matérielle et immatérielle de l'art moderne & contemporain*, Paris: Larousse, 2012, p. 485.
3. For those interested in this aspect, there is an exhaustive studio of cine and video in Fluxus in Peter Frank, "Un recorrido por el cine y video Fluxus", *Fluxus y fluxfilms (1962-2002)*; Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2002, pp. 21-38.
4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: the extensions of man*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966, p. 8.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
6. Laura Baigorri, "PAIK TV. Homenaje a un mongol visionario", *Nam June Paik y Corea: de lo fantástico a lo hiperreal*, ed. Menene Gras, Madrid: Fundación Telefónica, 2007, pp. 27-40, 31.
7. Arthur Danto, "TV and video", *The Madonna of the Future*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 160-169, 161.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
9. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oqUd8utr14>.
10. Herbert W. Franke, "The New Visual Language: The Influence of Computer Graphics on Art and Society", *Leonardo* 18-2 (1985), pp. 105-107, 105.
11. I highly recommend Liz Kotz's study *Words to be Looked at* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007) to get a deep and inspiring perspective on the relationships between music, poetry and visual arts in the 60s.
12. Andrew Ross, "Taking the Tennis Court Oath", *The Tribe of John Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Susan Schultz, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995, pp. 193-210, 195.
13. According to the *Electronic Literature Organization* (MIT, Cambridge, Mass) electronic literature "refers to works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer". It includes hypertext fiction and poetry, kinetic poetry presented in Flash and using other platforms, computer art installations which have literary aspects, interactive fiction and others. <http://eliterature.org/>.
14. There is a very interesting analysis of the kind of hypertext that *Afternoon* offers in Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore: The John's Hopkins Press, 1997, pp. 85-96.
15. For the concept of intermedia in art see Dick and Hannah Higgins, "Intermedia", *Leonardo*, 34-1 (2001), pp. 49-54.

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16. Laura Borràs, “La literatura digital bajo el estigma de la comparación”, *Ciberliteratura y comparatismo*, Rafael Alemany and Francisco Chico eds., Alicante: Universitat d’Alacant / SELGYC, 2012, pp. 49–61, 57.
17. http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/torres_poemas_no_meio/caminho1.html.
18. The horizontal version is a 3D panorama including video that the reader can drag; the vertical version uses html to allow the reader to read and play with the texts in a more conventional and simple way.
19. Matteo d’Ambrosio, “Une sémiotique à venir pour la cyberpoésie”, http://www.olats.org/projetpart/artmedia/2002/t_mAmbrosio.html.
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22. <http://camlieutterback.com/projects/text-rain/>.
23. http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/nadeau_stillstanding.html.
24. All the quotations are taken from the author’s webpage cited above.
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27. Bruno Nadeau and Jason Lewis, “Inter-inactivity”, <http://bruno.wyldco.com/still-standing/papers/inter-inactivity.pdf>.
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29. http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/nadeau_stillstanding.html.